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ABSTRACT

A model for employing graduate assistants is presented based in part on a survey of employment conditions during 1980 for graduate assistants at 56 major institutions in all 50 states. Responses were received from 46 or 82% of the institutions. The model is designed to offer directions to institutions that seek to develop or revise assistantship policies and procedures. It is noted that the implementation of an assistantship policy will vary according to the nature, tradition, and needs of the individual institution. Attention is directed to: the philosophy of graduate student assistantships; types of assistantships; qualifications for appointment; appointment procedures; levels of appointment; conditions of service; privileges, rights, and responsibilities of graduate assistants; evaluation of the graduate assistant; and reappointment. The following types of assistantships are defined: teaching assistantship, research assistantship, and administrative assistantship. (SW)

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A Model Policy For Graduate Assistantship Administration

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PREFACE

In 1981, the Tennessee Conference of Graduate Schools (TCGS) instituted a series of publications to address issues in graduate education that it judged to be of current significance. The publications are in keeping with the mission of the TCGS to "consider matters of common interest relating to graduate study and research, articulating the needs of graduate education, and influencing public opinion and legislation for the improvement and advancement of graduate education through appropriate channels," as stated in the Bylaws approved 22 April 1977. For its fourth publication, the Conference is pleased to present a study of the nature and function of the graduate assistantship.

Although the question of stipend levels has been considered regularly both informally and in surveys conducted by organizations such as the Council of Graduate Schools, few if any publications have addressed themselves to basic questions of purpose and goals. Graduate universities will differ in specific terms of assistantship awards, but they may be able to move toward a common philosophy as they strive to improve the assistantship experience.

The text for this publication has been prepared by Dr. C. W. Minkel (Dean) and Dr. Mary P. Richards (Associate Dean) of The Graduate School, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. It is based on a survey of fifty-six major institutions and supplementary materials provided by their graduate deans. Preliminary reports on the research were presented to the Conference of Southern Graduate Schools at its annual meetings in 1981 and 1982. Responses from the members of TCGS and CSGS were most helpful in preparing a final version of the document.

C.W.M.
M.P.R.

A Model Policy For Graduate Assistantship Administration

During 1980, a survey was conducted by The Graduate School of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville concerning the conditions under which graduate assistants are employed at fifty-six major institutions in all fifty states. It omitted any questions about the level of stipends, since these are included each year in a variety of other surveys. Rather, emphasis was placed upon definitions, procedures, rights, responsibilities and general philosophy. A copy of any published statement or document was requested. A response was received from forty-six, or 82 percent, of the graduate deans contacted. All but four provided printed materials pertaining to the graduate assistant appointments at their institutions, and about one-fourth provided formal printed handbooks.

Using these materials, the Dean for Graduate Studies, the Assistant Dean, and three administrative interns drew up a position paper for presentation at the 1981 annual meeting of the Council of Southern Graduate Schools (CSGS) on "Graduate Assistant Policy and Procedures: A Need for Codification?". The answer to the question was a firm yes. The survey of policies and procedures employed across the country revealed a wide variety of practices. Many of these are excellent individually, but little effort has been made to codify the entire spectrum of issues related to graduate assistantships. Given the likelihood of limited increases in stipend levels, attention to other conditions surrounding the assistantship is timely. These conditions include workload, reappointment, office facilities and services, parking privileges, grievance procedures, and greater specificity as to inherent rights and responsibilities. Response to the initial report indicates that many graduate schools are beginning to address these issues and are in need of guidelines to consider when framing their own policies and procedures. Graduate deans are interested to learn how institutions manage their graduate assistantships, and the range of practices that prevails.

As valuable as the survey was for determining the state of codification for graduate assistantships, it provided only a first step in the process envisioned by the authors. The next step requires value judgments to be made on the range of policies and procedures in order to formulate a model set of guidelines for graduate assistantship administration. The model set forth here is based upon the information received from other institutions, discussions with graduate deans, and our own judgment and experience. This model document may offer direction for those institutions in which there is desire to develop or to revise assistantship policies and procedures. The needs and circumstances of each institution will vary, but it should be instructive to measure what currently exists in relation to our model.

The topics covered in this comprehensive set of guidelines for assistantships are as follows: Philosophy, Definitions, Appointment Procedures, Conditions of Service, Evaluation, Reappointment, Benefits, and Grievance Procedures. Few universities would expect faculty members to function without having their rights and responsibilities defined in this way. Yet the administration of some universities sees no problem in having graduate assistants share the teaching and research functions with little, if any, codification of the conditions under which they perform their duties. Ideally, all graduate assistants should be provided full information on these topics before they begin service at a university. They need to understand their rights and responsibilities, and, indeed, their place and function within the university environment, if both they and the institution are to gain maximum benefit from the relationship.

Philosophy

Programs of graduate study are designed to transform the individual from student to professional scholar. When a graduate assistantship is well conceived and executed, it should serve as an ideal instrument to help facilitate the desired transformation. The primary goal of an assistantship, then, is to facilitate progress toward the graduate degree. Rather than interfere or conflict with the student's educational objective, the assistantship is to aid in the prompt and successful completion of the degree program. While the student assistant makes

progress toward an advanced degree, he or she also receives work experience in a profession under the supervision of a faculty mentor.

The graduate assistant is both student and employee. As a student, the graduate assistant is expected to perform well academically to retain the assistantship. He or she is to be counseled and evaluated regularly by a faculty mentor so as to develop professional skills. As an employee, the graduate assistant is expected to meet teaching, research, and/or administrative obligations. He or she is to work under the supervision of experienced faculty and receive in-service training. In sum, the graduate assistant receives financial support for graduate study by contributing to the teaching and/or research mission of the university. The totality of responsibility may be greater than that required of other students or staff members, but the opportunities for professional development also are greater for the graduate assistant.

A high proportion of lower-division teaching, and much of the day-to-day research function of the university, is conducted by graduate assistants. Since they play an important role in the educational activities of the institution, they should be given assignments and supervision that will help them to grow professionally. Their graduate studies and assistantship responsibilities should reinforce each other. Research projects, for instance, should lead to a thesis or dissertation. Teaching should give them greater insight into their own performance as students. The mentor relationship is vital, however, in achieving this type of integration. The best graduate assistant experience will evolve from careful planning and monitoring to see that both the student and the university benefit from the relationship.

The graduate assistantship should be used as a recruiting device to attract highly desired students, including women and minorities. Used effectively, the assistantship can be a tool in the university's equal opportunity/affirmative action program to the benefit of the academic community. It can build confidence in graduate students from diverse backgrounds as it helps them to become better professionals.

Types of Graduate Assistantships

Depending on the needs of the academic units, available funds, and the qualifications of the individual

graduate student, the following types of assistantships should be offered. More detailed information concerning assignments and criteria for appointment should be available from the department in which the assistantship is sought.

(1) Teaching Assistantship:

A teaching assistant works with students in a specific course, to provide support for the faculty member in charge, and only in unusual circumstances, to teach the course as the primary instructor. In both cases the teaching assistant works under the supervision of an experienced faculty member. The first kind of experience should be a prelude to the second; that is, the teaching assistant is not given major responsibility for a class without having had prior experience assisting a regular faculty member. In consultation with the supervisor, the teaching assistant works to gain teaching skills and a better grasp of the essentials of the academic discipline.

(2) Research Assistantship:

A research assistant normally is employed by the principal investigator of a funded research project. Ideally the assistant will be assigned a range of duties, such as library searches, field work, laboratory experiments, and preparation of reports, so as to gain professional skills to complement his or her graduate program. The student's work on a research project should lead to a thesis or dissertation, and provide long-range direction for the student's development as a scholar. He or she should be closely supervised by a mentor.

(3) Administrative Assistantship:

An administrative assistant works with the administrative staff of the department, college, or campus primarily in gathering, organizing, and analyzing information. These duties should be relevant to the graduate program and professional goals of the student. In some fields, editorial work will be assigned; in others, accounting duties may be appropriate. The student should be given the opportunity to put his or her academic training to use while learning new professional skills and broadening his or her perspective on the operation of the university. In concert with the supervising administrator, the assistant should be improving the quality of information available to make decisions in the best interests of the institution.

Qualifications for Appointment

To be eligible for an assistantship, a student should possess an undergraduate degree with substantial work in the field involved in the appointment. He or she should be fully admitted to a graduate program and be devoting full-time efforts toward the degree. He or she should have achieved, and should continue to maintain, an excellent academic record. Applicants should be studying for an advanced degree in the field to which they are appointed or in a closely-related field in which they have substantial background.

International students should not be eligible to apply for an assistantship until they have completed at least a term of graduate work. Their knowledge of the specific field in which they may work as a graduate assistant, and their command of the English language to a degree appropriate to the demands of the assignment, should be evaluated thoroughly by faculty supervisors before an award is made. Under no circumstances should an international student be employed as a teaching assistant until he or she has served a period of special apprenticeship.

Appointment Procedures

Appointment of graduate assistants should be made, or at least monitored, by the Dean of the Graduate School on recommendation of the Department Head and Dean of the College. Because the terms of individual awards may vary from department to department, and even within a single department, it is the responsibility of the Department Head to make the offer of appointment in an official letter. The letter should provide full information on the terms of the assistantship, including:

(1) title, percentage time, and length of appointment;
(2) stipend level and remission of fees, where appropriate;
(3) maximum student course load;
(4) description of duties;
(5) name and position of supervisor;
(6) evaluation procedures;
(7) resources available, including equipment, supplies, office space, and training aids;
(8) procedure and timing for reappointment;
(9) deadline for acceptance.

After a graduate student has accepted an assistantship, the Department Head should provide a copy of an assistantship handbook detailing rights and responsibilities of the graduate assistant, as well as grievance procedures. The new assistant should be notified of orientation meetings and other training opportunities as soon as they are scheduled. Specific departmental policies governing graduate assistants should be given in writing, and the assistant should be put in touch with the faculty supervisor prior to assuming the assistantship duties. All materials relevant to the actual assignment should be provided immediately upon acceptance of the appointment.

Levels of Appointment

Graduate assistantship appointments should be made for the adacemic year, so that both the graduate assistant and the department can plan effectively. Occasionally under special circumstances an appointment may be made for one term only. In such cases, an assistant who has performed well in the short-term appointment should be given priority for reappointment in a subsequent term over an applicant who has not been appointed previously.

If a graduate assistant fulfills the conditions for reappointment, he or she should be eligible to continue for a second year while a candidate for the Master's degree, and a third year while a candidate for the doctorate. An optional fourth year should be available for a doctoral candidate who is making good progress toward the degree but has not completed the dissertation.

Conditions of Service

A graduate assistant is expected to make steady progress toward the degree, while serving an apprenticeship complementary to that goal. The course load and assistantship responsibilities thus should form a totality that facilitates progress rather than hinders it. Ordinarily a student will hold only one assistantship at a time, and will not engage in employment other than the assistantship. A graduate assistant should register for a minimum of three hours, and no more than twelve hours, of course work during a given term. The specific course load should be determined in consultation with the faculty advisor or major professor. A graduate assistant should maintain a minimum 3.0 or B grade average. Graduate assistants should not be allowed to teach courses carrying graduate credit, nor to enroll in the courses for which they are assigned assistantship responsibilities.

Responsibilities

A fundamental responsiblity of the graduate assistant is to work closely with the faculty supervisor in carrying out assigned duties, at the same time making good progress toward the completion of the degree program. If the student's work load and academic program are properly coordinated, these responsibilities will be compatible. Whether working in a laboratory, classroom, office, or other setting, the graduate assistant is obligated to maintain standards of academic honesty and integrity and to report violations of these to the faculty supervisor. The graduate assistant should keep well informed of departmental, college, and institutional regulations, and follow them consistently.

The graduate assistant should keep careful records of work assignments so that progress and problems can be fully documented. Recognizing that the assistantship is a temporary position, the graduate assistant should leave records such that decisions can be traced, results verified, and incomplete work finished after the assistant has left the position.

If problems arise in the work assignment, the graduate assistant should seek help first from the faculty supervisor. Even if the graduate assistant encounters few problems, he or she is responsible for getting the most out of the apprenticeship experience. This means that the graduate assistant, in consultation with the faculty supervisor, should assess the work experience on a continuing basis in order to improve it. The assistant should articulate his or her goals early in the term of appointment and work with the supervisor to achieve them.

Privileges

Graduate assistants should be assigned space and equipment sufficient to carry out their assignments effectively. Normally they will be assigned a desk and

chair, file space, a mail box, and office and laboratory supplies. They also should have access to a typewriter, duplicating equipment, and a telephone. Graduate assistants should receive priority for university housing, parking privileges, and day-care facilities. They should also have the benefit of participation in an effective graduate student organization. In sum, they should have access to the privileges of graduate students generally—health care and psychological counseling services, libraries, and computer time—but have additional privileges as stated above in recognition of the services they provide as employees of the university.

Graduate teaching assistants should be provided copies of textbooks related to the course with which they are assisting. Research assistants will need copies of all materials related to their responsibilities, as well as access to equipment they would not normally be expected to purchase in pursuit of their own graduate programs. Graduate assistants preparing materials related to their assignments should have secretarial help, particularly when engaged in professional activities such as the preparation of articles for publication. A travel fund, to be disbursed according to predetermined guidelines, should be available in support of graduate assistants presenting papers or interviewing for positions at professional meetings.

Graduate assistant representatives should serve on all faculty committees related to their work assignments. For example, a graduate teaching assistant might serve on textbook selection committees for lower-division courses, and on curriculum committees revising the undergraduate program. They might be asked to serve as mentors to new graduate assistants. Above all, the graduate assistant has the privilege of being treated as a professional in his or her chosen field of study.

Rights

The graduate assistant should be notified in writing of all decisions that affect his or her status as an assistant. This includes advance notification of evaluation procedures and a summary of the evaluation. The graduate assistant should receive sufficient advance notice of reappointment procedures to gather materials and otherwise complete the process of application.

A formal grievance procedure should be established

and made known to all graduate assistants, who then have the right to initiate a grievance or to appeal a decision through the channels specified. The student should first inform the academic advisor of the problem, and, if necessary, appeal to the Department Head or program director. If the matter cannot be resolved at that point, the graduate assistant should follow the formal grievance procedure as outlined. At every step in the appeal process, the assistant has the right to a fair and impartial hearing. Every attempt should be made by the administrator hearing the appeal to resolve the problem in accordance with sound academic policy and the welfare of the individual. Counsel from within the university for the graduate assistant should be encouraged, whereas external legal counsel should not accompany the graduate assistant during the appeal process within the institution. That is, opportunity should be provided for academic judgment and procedures to resolve problems within the academic community.

The graduate assistant should be notified of any complaints received by the faculty mentor or Department Head concerning his or her performance of duties. The assistant has the right to respond to such complaints and to present evidence in defense, if appropriate. The burden of proof should rest with the person making the complaint.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a crucial part of the assistantship experience. It should be an ongoing process of communication between the graduate assistant and the faculty mentor. At least one formal evaluation, in a manner equitable to all graduate assistants in each academic unit, should occur annually. It should be a supportive process that helps the assistant to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to plan for improvement. The evaluation should also assure fairness in reappointment. Excellence should be noted in an assistant's record, as should continued inadequacies in performance.

Formal or informal evaluation should begin with a statement of the assistant's goals for the apprenticeship experience. The goals should be worked out with the faculty mentor early in the year. At that time the assistant should be informed of the ways that progress toward

those goals will be measured. The assistant should have a voice in the kinds of instruments used to measure performance. Ongoing informal evaluation should precede more formal measures, the results of which will be entered in the assistant's departmental record. As part of the total evaluation package, the assistant should assess the experience from his or her perspective.

Reappointment

Priority for reappointment should be given to those graduate assistants making good progress toward completion of the degree and performing well in their assistantship duties. These criteria should be measured in specific ways announced in advance of reapplication:

(1) minimum overall G.P.A., and G.P.A. for the current academic year, of at least 3.0;

(2) report of the academic advisor;

(3) formal evaluation by the faculty mentor supervising the work of the assistantship;

(4) length of time on assistantship;

(5) length of time in degree program.

Reappointment is not automatic for assistants who meet the minimum criteria. Rather, final decisons should be based on departmental needs, financial resources, equal opportunity/affirmative action, and the effort to provide as many graduate students as possible with assistantship opportunities.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this is a model document, one that sets forth a perceived ideal for the administration of graduate assistantships. The actual implementation of an assistantship policy will vary according to the nature, tradition, and needs of the individual institution. Policies adopted should be tailored to the organizational structure of each institution. The model document, it is hoped, will assist graduate school administrators in developing the best policy for their universities. This should be done by working in partnership with all parties involved in graduate assistantships. When all perspectives have been considered, and a policy agreed upon, the probabilities of conflict in the area of assistantships should be diminished. Each party will know its responsibilities and

can work toward the goal of quality in the graduate enterprise. When an effective assistantship policy is in operation, cause for external interference should be lessened. The university with a sound assistantship policy will have improved the educational experience for undergraduate and graduate students alike and enhanced the research effort of the institution.

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